The Apostles Predicted a First-Century Return of Christ

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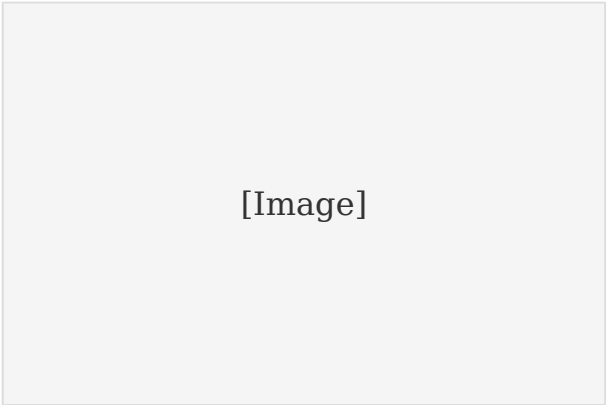

Jesus predicted a first-century return several times (Matt. 10:23; Matt.16:27-28; Matt. 24:33-34; Luke 21:22, 28, 31; Rev. 1:3; 22:10).

The apostles' interpretation

All the New Testament authors, including the apostles, believed they were living in the "last days" — that "evil age" (*Gal. 1:4*) — and would soon be rescued from the wrath about to come upon their persecutors (the Romans and Jews). They all believed *and* were inspired by the Holy Spirit to write in scripture that Christ's predictions would be fulfilled during their lifetime:

[1]God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, [2]*in these last days* has spoken to us in His Son… (*Heb. 1:1-2*, NASB unless otherwise noted.)

…he has appeared once for all *at the end of the ages* to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself. (*Heb. 9:26b, ESV*)

For He was foreknown before the foundation of the world, but has appeared *in these last times* for the sake of you (*1 Pet. 1:20*)

Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction, *upon whom the ends of the ages have come.* (*1 Cor. 10:11*)

Come now, you rich, weep and howl for your miseries which are coming upon you. (*Jas. 5:1*); It is *in the last days* that you have stored up your treasure! (v. 3b)

First-century Christians expected the returning Christ to give them relief from persecution and deliverance from the wrath about to come upon the whole world (the Roman civil war and disastrous Jewish revolt):

[10]'Because you have kept the word of My perseverance, *I also will keep you from the hour of testing,* that hour which is about to come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth. [11]'*I am coming quickly; hold fast what you have, so that no one will take your crown.* (*Rev. 3:10-11*)

…wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus, *who rescues us from the wrath to come.* (*1 Thess. 1:10*)

[3]…the Lord Jesus Christ, [4]who gave Himself for our sins *so that He might rescue us from this present evil age…* (*Gal. 1:3b-4*)

The Greek for "rescue" in *Gal. 1:4* is ἐξαιρέω *(exaireo),* translated "tear it out" in Matt. 5:29 and 18:9; "pluck out" in the KJV.

The rescue would take place on the day of Christ's return:

[6]For after all it is only just for God to repay with affliction those who afflict you, [7]and to *give relief to you who are afflicted and to us as well when the Lord Jesus will be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire,* [8]dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. [9]These will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power, [10]*when He comes to be glorified in His saints on that day,* and to be marveled at among all who have believed—for our testimony to you was believed. (*2 Thess. 1:6-10*)

First-century Christians could "see the day drawing near":

[24]and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, [25]not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more *as you see the day drawing near.* (*Heb. 10:24-25*)

This could hardly refer to an event to take place 2,000 years into the future.

The apostles *knew* the end was near:

Children, *it is the last hour;* and just as you heard that antichrist is coming, *even now many antichrists have appeared; from this we know that it is the last hour.* (*1 John 2:18*)

[11]…it is already the hour for you to awaken from sleep; for now salvation is nearer to us than when we believed. [12]*The night is almost gone, and the day is near.* Therefore let us lay aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. (*Rom. 13:11-12*)

Do not seek a wife. (1 Cor. 7:27b); [29]But this I say, brethren, *the time has been shortened,* so that from now on those who have wives should be as though they had none; [30]and those who weep, as though they did not weep; and those who rejoice, as though they did not rejoice; and those who buy, as though they did not possess; [31]and those who use the world, as though they did not make full use of it; *for the form of this world is passing away.* (vv. 29-31)

The end of all things is near… (*1 Pet. 4:7*)

Jesus said some of his contemporaries would still be alive at his coming (Matt. 16:28). We find Paul preaching the same thing:

[15]For this we say to you *by the word of the Lord,* that *we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord,* will not precede those who have fallen asleep. [16]For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. [17]Then *we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air,* and so we shall always be with the Lord. (*1 Thess. 4:15-17*)

…we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed (*1 Cor. 15:51b*)

Regarding the signs leading up to his return, Jesus said the following to his disciples:

…when *you* see all these things, recognize that He is near, right at the door. (*Matt. 24:33*)

Later in the first century, James wrote this:

[8]*…the coming of the Lord is near.* [9]*…the Judge is standing right at the door.* (*Jas.*

5:8b, 9b)

The apostles Paul, Peter, James, and John all wrote that the day of His return is near. (See, for example, Romans 13:12; 1 Peter 4:7; James 5:7-9; 1 John 2:18.)

—John MacArthur, *Because the Time Is Near* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2007), 22

It is clear from the New Testament that they all expected the Second Coming in their own lifetime…they had a reason, and one which you will find very embarrassing. Their Master had told them so.

—C. S. Lewis, *The World's Last Night and Other Essays* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1973), 98

Conclusion

Clearly, the apostles did predict a first-century return of Christ.

Objections

Objection: Granted, the apostles *thought* Jesus would return within their lifetime, but evidently, they were mistaken. After all, they were only human.

Answer: The apostles wrote as though they *knew* Christ's return would occur within their lifetime: "we *know* that it is the last hour" (*1 John 2:18*). Furthermore, their interpretation of Christ's teachings cannot be wrong. The gospel preached by the apostles and other New Testament authors came directly from the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit:

…the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, *He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you.* (*John 14:26*)

…when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, *He will guide you into all the truth; …He will disclose to you what is to come.* (*John 16:13*)

…our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also *in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction…* (*1 Thess. 1:5*)

[8]…if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, *he is to be accursed!* [9]As we have said before, so I say

again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to what you received, *he is to be accursed!* (*Gal. 1:8-9*); For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but *I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.* (v. 12)

Therefore, the return of Christ and all related events must have occurred in the first century. Those taking any other position dare to presume *they* understand the timing of these events better than the divinely inspired apostles of Jesus Christ, and fail to consider the following:

1. The apostles were preaching exactly what they had been taught by Jesus;
2. They were promised divine revelation regarding "what is to come";
3. They recorded their teachings in divinely inspired scripture.

Any suggestion the apostles were mistaken implies one or more of the following:

1. The Holy Spirit failed to tell the apostles "what is to come," or;
2. The apostles misunderstood the Holy Spirit's inspiration;
3. The New Testament contains serious errors;
4. Jesus was misleading the apostles, or;
5. Jesus was mistaken too, in which case, God the Father was mistaken as well because he was telling Jesus what to say (John 3:34; 12:49; 14:10, 24; 17:8).

If the apostles were mistaken, Jewish people have no option but to reject their gospel. Under the Old Covenant, anyone making false predictions in the name of God was to be executed:

[20]'…the prophet who speaks a word presumptuously in My name *which I have not commanded him to speak,* or which he speaks in the name of other gods, *that prophet shall die.*' [21]"You may say in your heart, *'How will we know the word which the Lord has not spoken?'* [22]"When a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord, *if the thing does not come about or come true, that is the thing which the Lord has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously;* you shall not be afraid of him. (*Deut. 18:20-22*)

Jeremiah reaffirmed the criterion by which a prophet should be validated:

Only when his predictions come true can we know that he is really from the Lord. (*Jer. 28:9b, NLT*)

Jeremiah was referring to the false prophet Hananiah who was killed by God for making a time-restricted false prediction (Jer. 28:1-17).

Ezekiel condemned false prophets:

Thus says the Lord GOD, “Woe to the foolish prophets who are *following their own spirit and have seen nothing.*” (*Ezek. 13:3*)

Zechariah *strongly* condemned false prophets:

…his own father and mother will tell him, *‘You must die, for you have prophesied lies in the name of the Lord.’* And as he prophesies, *his own father and mother will stab him.* (*Zech. 13:3b, NLT*)

God insures predictions made by *his* prophets do not fail:

Samuel grew and the Lord was with him *and let none of his words fail.* (*1 Sam. 3:19*); Behold now, there is a man of God in this city [Samuel], and the man is held in honor; *all that he says surely comes true.* (ch. 9:6)

[24]This is what the Lord says…“I am the Lord… [25]*I expose the false prophets as liars…*I cause the wise to give bad advice, thus proving them to be fools. [26]*But I carry out the predictions of my prophets!*” (*Isa. 44:24-26, NLT*)

“God’s household” was “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone” (Eph. 2:19b-20; Rev. 21:14). The popular delusion presents a church built upon a foundation of classic false prophets. Those teaching that the apostles were mistaken attack the very foundation of the church, deny the work of the Holy Spirit, and according to Jesus and Paul, could be in danger of eternal condemnation (Mark 3:28-29; Gal. 1:8-9, 12). If Christ’s “holy apostles” (Eph. 3:5), the Holy Spirit, and Holy Scripture all failed so abysmally in the first century, why would any sensible person trust these sources regarding a future fulfillment — or salvation?

There is only one acceptable conclusion: the apostles were right. Otherwise, they were false prophets to be counted among the “liars” and “fools” deserving execution. If they were wrong, we Christians are wasting our time studying their unreliable predictions in the supposed “inerrant” or “infallible” Word of God.

All scripture referring to end-time events must relate to the persecution of Christians under Nero, the Roman civil war, and the Jewish revolt against Rome (a.d. 64-70) which culminated in the destruction of the temple and the end of animal sacrifices. The promised return of Christ, resurrection, rapture, and judgment must have occurred during that period. The interpretation of every

difficult prophetic passage must be consistent with this premise. Please read *Timeline: The Great Tribulation.*

Objection: The apostles did not teach that Christ's return was definitely going to occur within their lifetime; they simply taught that it was *imminent,* meaning it *could* happen at any time, but not necessarily soon. The return of Christ is *always* imminent; it has been continually imminent since the first century. Dr. Tim LaHaye, author of the *Left Behind* series, says, "the rapture is imminent," (Tim LaHaye, Jerry B. Jenkins, *Are We Living in the End Times?* [Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1999], 116), but also that the Lord could tarry another "thousand years" (Ibid., xi). Virtually all Bible commentators essentially concur with Dr. LaHaye's use of *imminent.*

Answer: Yes, virtually all Bible commentators subtly *distort* the dictionary definition of *imminent.* An event cannot be "continually imminent." The correct definition does not allow for this:

imminent: About to occur; impending (*The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language,* Fourth Edition. Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004.)

Something "about to occur" is an event that will take place very soon. There is no room for 2,000 years; nothing in the definition suggesting any uncertainty regarding the timing, i.e., that the event *could* happen soon.

Example: If you were to wake up in the middle of the night to find your house on fire, it could be said that you were in imminent danger. If you failed to get out, you would soon be dead. However, when there is *no* fire, which is normally the case, it is true that your house *could* catch fire at some point, but does that mean you are in perpetual imminent danger? Of course not. Do you lay in bed every night thinking you are in imminent danger? Not likely. Surely, no one would suggest people are in imminent danger simply because the building they occupy *could* catch fire someday. However, that is exactly how modern theologians twist the definition of *imminent.* This sham would be unnecessary if they would give up their unbiblical futurist doctrine and begin to believe God the Father, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, Christ's "holy apostles," and the Bible regarding predictions of a first-century return of Christ.

Outside the field of eschatology, we have never noticed anyone using *imminent* in the manner LaHaye and countless other commentators employ it. Strangely, it appears these authors actually do understand the correct definition. They will

often use *imminent* correctly in other places throughout their writings. It's only when they come to the return of Christ and related eschatological events that they stealthily redefine the word to harmonize with their extended-delay presupposition. If they were honest, they would not use *imminent.* But what might they use instead? There *is* no word we know of that refers to something that "could happen at any time, but not necessarily soon." So, they settle for *imminent*. The problem is *imminent* contains not the slightest hint of equivocation. It means something is *most definitely about to occur very soon.* It is true the apostles taught that Christ's return was imminent; but using the correct definition, we must conclude his return was about to take place in the first-century.

Objection: Your claim that the return of Christ took place in the past is ridiculous! *Obviously,* it has not yet occurred.

Answer: No, what is obvious is that Christians have seriously misunderstood the *nature* of Christ's return.

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